

# Strange things British people eat

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**I**f you are newly arrived in this country, you may still be grappling with some of the strange things we eat. Let me try to dispel some of the mystery about our traditional foods.

## Meal times

Before talking about specific foods, it might be a good idea to explain at what times of the day meals are eaten. In Britain, the main meals are breakfast, lunch and dinner. In certain parts of the country, the midday meal is also referred to as dinner. Meals tend to be later than Americans are used to. Lunch is usually taken any time between noon and 2 p.m. and dinner is normally eaten no earlier than 7:30 p.m. and often as late as 9:30 p.m.

For busy, working people, traditional cooked breakfasts are not eaten during the week, but if you stay in bed-and-breakfast or farmhouse accommodation, you can expect to be served a very substantial breakfast indeed. In Scotland a dish called porridge, oatmeal boiled in water or milk, is served as a part of breakfast, and kippers, smoked and dried herrings, are also popular.

One quaint custom is to have afternoon tea – sometimes called high tea. This consists of very small sandwiches with no crust – which are eaten very daintily – scones and jam, cake and what seems like an endless quantity of tea. Many hotels in the local area offer afternoon tea, but if you want to really do things in style, tea at the Ritz in London is the thing to do – complete with musical accompaniment. You might even see the odd celebrity come through its magnificent doorway.

## Eating out

When eating out, some of the dishes on offer you may come across will include:

**Bangers and Mash.** Sausages and mashed potatoes. Newmarket is the home of the “Celebrated Newmarket Sausage,” the recipe for which was devised by William Harper around 1870. The famous recipe has been passed down through three generations of the Harper family to Grant Powter, who is William Harper’s great-grandson. He currently runs the business which still operates from Wellington Street, Newmarket.

**Shepherd’s Pie.** This consists of meat, which has been minced, covered with mashed potatoes. Depending on the recipe used, the dish can also contain onions, mushrooms, peas and seasoning. The potatoes are

cooked so that they are crispy and brown on top and soft underneath. In the past, this dish was made as a way of using up the meat left over from the Sunday joint of beef or lamb and was considered an economical way of feeding a large family. It is also known as cottage pie, though cottage pie normally has a top made from short crust pastry.

**Steak and Kidney Pie or Pudding.** The kidney content of this dish can give it a quite distinctive flavour and, for this reason, some people do not like it. The beef used is normally stewing beef, a cut which has been cooked for a long while to make it more tender. The quality of the gravy can also make a difference to the enjoyment of this dish – the best gravy is made with the liquids saved from cooking the meat. Steak and kidney pies are traditionally covered in flaky pastry, which is supposed to melt in your mouth whereas puddings are a much more solid affair, being made from suet pastry – a much softer texture and very filling. Suet is an animal fat, so not a good idea if cholesterol is an important consideration in your diet.

**Haggis.** A traditional Scottish dish eaten around “Burns Night,” which is a traditional festival on Jan. 25 to celebrate the works of Robert Burns, a famous Scottish poet. The dish is made from chopped sheep’s offal and oatmeal traditionally cooked in a sheep’s stomach. It tastes better than it sounds, believe me.

**Scones.** Scones are a cross between an individual cake and biscuit (cookie). In the south west of the country, particularly Devon and Cornwall, they are sliced in half and eaten with jam and cream as part of a cream tea. They usually contain currants or sultanas, but you will also find cheese scones.

**Shortbread.** Another traditional recipe from Scotland, this delicious sweet biscuit is best made with butter among the ingredients to produce the unique flavour – which is referred to as being “short.” Readily available in England all year round, it is particularly popular at Christmas time to give as a present.

**Trifle.** A trifle is a dessert with a sponge (cake) base, fruit and jelly (jello), custard (cornflour-based mixture) and usually topped with whipped cream. There are many variations to recipes; some use a jam sponge (known as a Swiss roll) as a base and some do not contain jelly. Sometimes, they contain sherry as an added ingredient.

**Toad in the Hole.** This is simply a Yorkshire Pudding made from a batter mixture

and baked, with sausages cooked in it. It is usually cooked in a large baking tin. Yorkshire puddings are served with roast beef and normally individual puddings baked in a tin like a muffin tin – except in the north of the country where they are often eaten with gravy prior to the main course.

**Ploughman’s.** Usually offered as a choice in pubs, a ploughman’s consists of cheese, bread and pickles. The pickles are traditionally Branston Pickle or white pickled onions.

**Cornish pasty.** This contains meat, onion and potato in a pastry case. The pastry is rolled into a round, the filling laid on to it and the pastry then folded over and sealed at the edges.

**Coffee Cake.** If you invite a British person in for coffee and coffee cake, they will more than likely expect a coffee-flavoured cake. I well remember being served coffee cake and wondering why it didn’t taste like the coffee cakes I was used to until it was explained to me that coffee cake is any cake you eat with coffee.

## Other foods

A few other terms might need some clarification: French fries are often referred to over here as “chips” and potato chips are known as “crisps.” When ordering a soft drink for children, as well as fizzy or carbonated drinks (sodas) we have what is called “squashes” – still drinks, which have no carbonation. If you buy a bottle of squash in the supermarket for home use, remember that they are concentrated and need to have water added. Otherwise you end up with a very strong syrupy drink.

One last thing, if you are unsure whether or not you will like a particular dish, do ask the waiter or waitress to explain what it is made of and how it will look – they will be happy to do this for you. There is nothing more off-putting than building up great expectations when ordering a meal only to be thoroughly disappointed when it arrives at the table.



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